

1.0 BACKGROUND

This environmental assessment (EA) provides analysis of potential impacts associated with the proposed approval of annual exchange/transfer(s) of up to 150,000 acre-feet of Central Valley Project (CVP) water between CVP contractors through an internal exchange of State Water Project (SWP) water by the Kern County Water Agency (KCWA). This approval process would be in effect for 5 years between March 2001 and February 2006.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the implementing regulations issued by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) require the lead agency to prepare an EA for federal actions not qualifying for categorical exclusion and that would not require an environmental impact statement.

This EA has been prepared in accordance with the NEPA of 1969, as amended, 42 U.S. Code (U.S.C.) 4321 *et seq.*; and the CEQ regulations implementing NEPA and 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 1500-1508. The Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) is the lead agency for NEPA compliance, on behalf of the Department of the Interior (Interior) and in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

1.1 PROJECT LOCATION

The project area for this EA is within the Central Valley of California. Counties in the project area include Kern, Kings, Tulare, Fresno, Madera, Merced, Stanislaus, and San Joaquin County. Under the Proposed Action, certain water contractors in these counties would be eligible to originate water transfer/exchange, receive water transfer/exchange, or exchange CVP water for SWP water. The regional location of these water contractors is shown in Figure 1-1. The originating (eastside) contractors are listed in Appendix A, the receiving (westside) contractors are listed in Appendix B, and contractors eligible to exchange CVP water for SWP water are listed in Appendix C.

1.2 PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to approve the exchange and transfer of CVP water, 215 water (uncontrollable flood waters), or other water from eastside contractors to westside contractors through an internal exchange of SWP water with the KCWA and to identify programmatic environmental effects over a 5-year period.

There are several interrelated needs of westside contractors, eastside contractors, and Reclamation that the Proposed Action would partially satisfy. Westside CVP water contractors need to obtain additional water because current CVP water supplies have been reduced by 40 to 60 percent due to statutory environmental commitments. Depending on seasonal conditions, eastside CVP contractors may have an immediate need to transfer and exchange water. Since Reclamation has a review process for water transfers, there is a need to shorten the administrative review process to coincide with the eastside contractors' need for an expedited review and approval.

1.3 SCOPE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

In accordance with CEQ regulations, potential environmental impacts are discussed in proportion to their significance. The level of analysis was determined by the amount of information that would be required for the decision makers to make an informed choice. Consequently, different levels of detail are presented for the resource areas discussed in this EA.

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Figure 1-1 Regional Location Map
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This EA presents analyses and descriptions of the potential environmental impacts that would result from the project and identifies all required environmental permits. As appropriate, the environmental consequences of the action are described in terms of regional or site-specific effects.

Chapter 2.0 of this EA describes the Proposed Action and the No-Action Alternative. In addition to providing project information, this section describes the general site setting of the Proposed Action and discusses the No-Action Alternative.

Chapter 3.0 provides regional and site-specific information related to hydrologic resources, biological resources, cultural resources, agricultural resources, land use, air quality, noise, geologic resources, recreational resources, solid waste management, hazardous materials/waste management, socioeconomics, health and safety, visual resources, utilities, and environmental justice. The regional information in this section provides the context for site-specific information on resources that would potentially be affected by the Proposed Action.

Chapter 4.0 addresses potential effects of the proposed project on each of the resource areas analyzed. Possible impacts of project activities are analyzed, the significance of each impact is identified for each resource area, and mitigation measures are provided. The mitigation measures are designed to ensure that none of the potential effects of the Proposed Action significantly impact the environment. Potential cumulative impacts are also addressed.

Chapter 5.0 presents a list of applicable regulations requiring compliance prior to implementing the Proposed Action.

Chapters 6.0 through 9.0 identify persons and agencies contacted, report references, preparers of this EA, and acronyms and abbreviations, respectively.

Appendix A is a list of the Potential Originators of Transfer/Exchange. Appendix B is a list of the Potential Recipients of Water Transfer/Exchange. Appendix C is a list of the Kern County Water Agency Member Units.

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